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C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 000563

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [BG](#) [BG](#) [BGD](#)

SUBJECT: SCA A/S ROCCA'S MEETING WITH GENERAL ERSHAD

Classified By: CDA Judith Chammas, reasons para 1.4 b, d.

1. (SBU) On January 27, SCA A/S Christina Rocca met with Jatiya Party chairman General Ershad. Charge and conoff (notetaker) were also present.

2. (C) Asked to comment on the current state of affairs in Bangladesh, Ershad replied, "You mean fundamentalism and the Election Commission?" The EC, he asserted, should be fully independent and not be playing "hide and seek games." The EC should have its own budget and authority down to the district level, and that the BDG should take action to make the electoral process visibly more transparent.

3. (C) Regarding the Awami League (AL) and the upcoming elections, Ershad predicted that Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League would likely boycott the election unless major changes are made. He stated the view that all parties should participate in parliament; otherwise, parliament would eventually cease to function. Bangladeshis, he continued, are fed with both the AL and the BNP, and wants a change. A third party can't win alone, but a strong third party could still do well. Ershad cited as the BNP's major problems corruption in government and high prices of consumables\*especially sugar and cotton.

4. (C) Ershad stated extremism is a new phenomenon for Bangladesh. The current government created Bangla Bhai to counter local communist thugs who were extorting money and causing problems, he said. Bangla Bhai and the JMB evolved into a well organized national terrorist movement that is "no joke." The BDG is now trying to stop the militants and maybe the violence has stopped; however, until Bangla Bhai and Abdur Rahman are arrested, it won't stop for certain.

5. (C) Ershad also expressed concern with political violence and extra-judicial killings committed by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). No other country, he claimed, has a force like RAB that is allowed to kill with apparent impunity. No one is safe, he said. "I could be picked up tomorrow." All people have the constitutionally-guaranteed right of due process. However, people are fed up with corruption and extortion, he said, and want to be able to move freely throughout the country. The common people see RAB as helping with that situation

6. (C) A/S Rocca underscored the importance of free, fair, and transparent elections. Ershad pointed out that with over 200,000 polling places in Bangladesh, it is impossible to monitor the whole election. BNP candidates are raising huge sums of money for the election, and in the remote areas money and muscle dominate politics. Ershad stated that the EC should use transparent plastic ballot boxes so everyone can see what is inside. Ershad mentioned that he believes there is a 50/50 chance that the BNP will not win the next election because of popular dissatisfaction with its record. "Something unexpected will happen. An election revolution," he hoped. Ershad urged the USG to push for free and fair elections. A/S Rocca agreed that free and fair elections are extremely important and stated that she hopes all parties participate in the upcoming election.

7. (U) A/S Rocca cleared this message.  
CHAMMAS